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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of explicit versus implicit instruction in story grammar on the narrative writing skills of English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students at the university level. Subjects were 83 freshmen enrolled in English at the Faculty of Education at Suez Canal University (Egypt). The subjects were randomly assigned to explicit and implicit story grammar instruction conditions. In the explicit condition, students read, analyzed, and imitated 15 story examples; in the implicit condition, students only read the same story examples, focusing on meaning rather than form. The study lasted five consecutive weeks. Subjects were pre- and posttested on story writing. Results indicate that students in the two treatment conditions scored about equally on the pretest, but those in the explicit condition scored significantly higher in the posttest, supporting the value of explicit instruction in story grammar. (Contains 38 references.) (MSE)

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Effect of instruction in story grammar on the narrative writing of EFL students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of explicit vs. implicit instruction in story grammar on the narrative writing of EFL students at the university level. The subjects for the study were 83 freshmen enrolled in the English section at the Faculty of Education in Suez, Suez Canal University, Egypt. These subjects were randomly assigned to explicit and implicit story grammar instruction conditions. In the explicit condition students read, analyzed, and imitated 15 story examples (one per session). In the implicit condition students only read the same story examples (one per session) focusing on meaning rather than form. The study lasted for 5 consecutive weeks (3 sessions per week). Prior to, and at the end of the treatments, all subjects were tested in story writing.

Statistical analyses of the obtained data revealed that students in the two treatment conditions scored about equally on the pretest, but those in the explicit condition scored significantly higher on the posttest. Based on these results, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were suggested.

Theoretical background

A story has a well-defined episodic structure called story grammar (Stein and Glenn, 1979; Piccolo, 1986; Weaver and Dickinson, 1982). Some language teaching theoreticians (e. g., Gordon, 1989; May, 1994; Montague, 1988; Rodes and Dudley-Marling, 1988; Tierney et al., 1995; Vacca and Vacca, 1989) stress the importance of such grammar and encourage composition teachers to teach it directly to students. The basic assumption underlying this position is that students need explicit instruction in how to write. Other language teaching theoreticians (e. g., Krashen, 1984, 1994; Lehnert, 1982; Moffett, 1983; Schmitt and O'Brein, 1986) reject the idea of teaching story grammar directly to students, claiming that students naturally learn story structure from their own reading experiences. The assumption here is that the acquisition of writing (in Krashen's terms) occurs via reading for meaning—that is, understanding what is written rather than how it is expressed.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the explicit and implicit approaches to story grammar instruction exist with fervent adherents to each one of them. Therefore, there is a pressing need to validate the assumptions upon which these approaches are based. The present study responds to this need by investigating the effect of these two approaches on the narrative writing of EFL students at the university level.

Review of related research

A survey of research on the effect of instruction in story grammar upon writing performance revealed that studies done in this area are limited to native English-speaking students. Edmonson (1983) found no statistically significant differences in the number of story structure elements in stories written by elementary students as a result of instruction in story structure versus instruction in literature and drama appreciation. Five other studies, however, provided evidence that explicit story structure instruction had a positive effect on story writing. Gordon and Braun (1982) found that fifth-graders who received story schema training wrote stories that were higher in quality than those who received teacher-directed discussion, probes and activities related to drama and literature appreciation. Gordon and Braun (1983) found that fifth-grade students who received explicit story structure instruction outperformed those who wrote drama on the number of story structure elements in their written stories. Fitzgerald

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and Teasley (1986) found that fourth-grade students who received explicit story structure instruction outperformed those who received dictionary and word study instruction on both organization and quality of writing. Gambrell and Chasen (1991) found that fourth- and fifth-grade below-average readers who received explicit story structure instruction (ESSI) outperformed those who received story structure awareness instruction (SSAI) on both the quantity and quality of writing. In their study the ESSI consisted of these four steps: (1) introduction of story structure grammar, (2) story examples, (3) teacher modeling, and (4) teacher guided story generation. The SSAI consisted of these two steps: (1) introduction of story structure grammar, and (2) story examples. Leaman (1993) found that elementary school learning disabled students who received direct story grammar instruction in both reading and writing composed more structured stories than those who received direct story grammar instruction in reading only and those who received no direct story grammar instruction at all.

The results of the studies reviewed above—with one exception—provide evidence that explicit story grammar instruction improves the narrative writing of average and below average students. None of these studies, however, dealt specifically with the effect of explicit vs. implicit instruction in story grammar on the narrative writing of EFL students. This underscores the need for further investigations into this area.

Research hypotheses

On the basis of the research reviewed previously, the hypotheses of the study were stated as follows:

(1) There would be no significant difference in the mean scores on the pretest between the explicit group and the implicit group.

(2) The explicit group would score significantly higher than the implicit group on the posttest.

Method

Subjects

The sample for the study was the entire population of university freshmen (N = 88) enrolled in the department of English at the Faculty of Education in Suez, Suez Canal University, Egypt. This sample was randomly assigned to explicit and implicit story grammar instruction conditions with forty-four students in each. The researcher eliminated from the data analyses any student who missed two or more sessions of instruction. Of the entire population initially involved in the study, 83 students completed both treatment and testing phases (41 in the explicit group and 42 in the implicit group). All subjects participated in the study outside of their regular class time.

Materials

The materials for the study were 15 narrative texts. These texts were drawn from Nila B. Smith's series, *Be A Better Reader* (New Jersey: Globe Fearon Educational Publishers, 1997). All contained the narrative elements that constituted the scale for scoring the pre- and posttests. All had not been used by the subjects prior to the onset of the study. All were used without any accompanying exercises to make them suitable for the two treatment conditions. To ensure that these texts would be comprehensible to the subjects, a pilot study was conducted with 20 students randomly selected from freshmen enrolled in the department of English at the Faculty of Education in Menoufia, Egypt. The results of this pilot study showed that all texts were appropriate to the sample's reading level.

Research variables

There were two independent variables in this study: (1) explicit story grammar instruction, and (2) implicit story grammar instruction. In the explicit condition students received story grammar instruction through a three-stage method: (1) reading story examples (one per session) with the help of the teacher, (2) analyzing the elements of these examples

guided by story grammar questions (see Table 1), and (3) writing similar stories with the help of the teacher. In the implicit condition students only read the same story examples (one per session) focusing on meaning rather than form. To guide their understanding of the meaning of a story, the experimenter gave them prereading questions that corresponded to its theme (see Table 2).

The dependent variable for the study was EFL students' narrative writing with respect to the presence of story grammar elements.

Table 1
Questions That Correspond to a Story Grammar*

1. Time—When does the story take place?
2. Location—Where does the story take place?
3. Characters—Who are the characters in the story?
4. Goal—What is the main goal or purpose of the main character?
5. Interference with goal—What is the obstruction of the main character's goal?
6. Initiating event—What did the main character do first?
7. Internal response—How did the main character feel about his/her first try?
8. Attempt—What did the main character do second?
9. Consequence—What happened as a result of the main character's second try?
10. Reaction—How does the main character feel now?

*Adapted from Leaman (1993).

Table 2
Questions That Correspond to a Story Theme*

1. What does the title of the story mean?
2. What did the people in the story discover about themselves or others by the end of the story?
3. What did the people in the story discover about life by the end of the story?
4. What is the author's message to the reader?

* Taken from Smith (1997a).

Instrument

The pre- and posttests were scored in accordance with an analytic scoring scale devised by Piccolo (1986). This scale consists of ten components (time, location, characters, goal of the main character, interference with goal, initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence, and reaction). Each component is assigned a rating from 0 to 2 with the higher numbers being the better scores. The ten components added together represented a maximum score of 20 for the dependent variable of the study.

Scoring

The pre- and posttest stories written by each student were scored by two independent raters. Before scoring, the two raters were instructed in the use of the rating scale and the inter-rater reliability between them was checked to ensure that there would be little difference in their scoring. The obtained inter-rater reliability was 0.95. All stories were scored blindly in that the raters were not aware which test was designated as the pre- or the posttest. After scoring, stories with scores that differed by two or more points were rated by a third rater. The score for each written story was the average of two ratings, either the first two ratings, or, in case in which a third rater was required, the average of the third rating and the closest score.

Procedure

The study took place at the beginning of the first semester of the 1998/1999 academic year. Before the treatments began, all subjects were tested in story writing. Following pretesting, the subjects were randomly assigned to explicit and implicit story grammar instruction conditions. They were also informed not to discuss their randomly assigned instructional approaches with each other or with anyone else during the experiment. After that, the two treatments were administered by the researcher, at the rate of three one-hour sessions per week over five consecutive weeks. At the end of the treatments, a posttest was administered to both groups and the data collected were analyzed using the t-test. All analyses used the 0. 05 level of significance.

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Table 3

The difference in the mean scores between the explicit group and the implicit group on the pretest

Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Explicit	41	7.44	1.27	0.72
Implicit	42	7.64	1.30	

As shown in Table 3, statistical analysis of the pretest data revealed no significant difference in the mean scores between the explicit group and the implicit group ($t = 0.72$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. The pretest results also indicated that the two groups were poor story writers. This result may be due to the fact that expositions represent the predominant text type in Egyptian EFL curricula at both the preparatory and secondary school levels.

Posttest results

Table 4

The difference in the mean scores between the explicit group and the implicit group on the posttest

Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Explicit	41	11.41	2.86	6.30
Implicit	42	7.98	2.05	

As shown in Table 4, students in the explicit group scored significantly higher than those in the implicit group on the posttest ($t = 6.30$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that explicit story grammar instruction improved EFL students' ability to write more structured narrative stories than implicit story grammar instruction. Therefore, the second hypothesis was accepted. Three reasons may account for the high scores achieved by the explicit group in this study. The first reason is that explicit story grammar instruction included a component for transferring story grammar knowledge to story writing. The second reason is that reading was viewed as a composing process in the explicit story grammar instruction condition. The third reason is that below average students might profit more from explicit instruction.

It also appears from the results of the study that implicit story grammar instruction did not result in students' internalizing and using knowledge of story grammar on their own. A comparison of pre- and posttest scores indicated that the post-score gain was not significant for this group ($t = 0.89$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, the results of the study did not support the reading hypothesis which states that writing ability is not learned but acquired via extensive reading in which the focus is on the message. In other words, simply reading story examples was insufficient to teach EFL students how to write stories. This result is consistent with that of Mills (1990) who found that extended reading experiences made no significant differences in posttest scores of the writing quality of narrative essays for high school students.

Limitations of the study

The short time period of five weeks for the actual treatment is a serious limitation of this study. Development in writing might take a longer period of time. Another limitation of this study is that its findings are generalizable only for freshmen at the university level. The findings are also limited to the instructional procedures used in the two treatment conditions.

Conclusions and recommendations

Within the above limitations, the results of the study suggest that explicit story grammar instruction is more effective than implicit story grammar instruction for improving the quality of EFL students' narrative writing at the intermediate level. Therefore, the researcher recommends that explicit story grammar instruction should be incorporated into EFL reading and writing programs at the this level. Another recommendation is to replicate this study with an increase in the sample for an extended period of time. A final recommendation is to compare the effect of explicit vs. implicit instruction in story grammar on the quality and quantity of narrative writing of average and below average students.

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